

Accountability for All:

What Voters Want from Education Candidates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

R E S U L T S

In this new era of accountability, candidates will be judged for their education leadership. They must be knowledgeable about the issues and relentless about results. I predict that the avowed education candidates who fail to follow up platitudes with performance, and who fail to match rhetoric with results, won't be around much longer. If I were running for office, I would be studying this report and taking notes to make sure I could pass the voters' test.

—Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., former governor of North Carolina

Americans place quality education at the top of their list of priorities, and they want their elected leaders to do the same. According to a national public opinion poll published by Public Education Network and *Education Week*, education is a hot-button issue: Americans want their elected leaders to produce results, not rhetoric. They also want leaders who will make education funding recession proof.

PUTTING POLITICIANS TO THE TEST: NO CUTS IN EDUCATION SPENDING

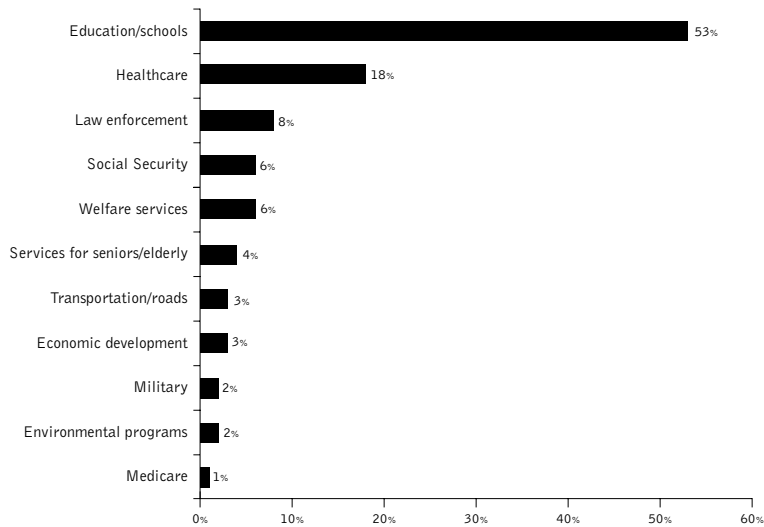
The poll, *Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates*, shows that Americans oppose any cuts to education funding, even at the cost of deep cuts to other services they deem essential—services such as healthcare, Social Security, law enforcement, and roads

and transportation. When asked to name one or two priorities that government should shield from spending cuts, 53 percent of Americans cite education and schools. That percentage equals the combined total of all other responses, including healthcare (18 percent), law enforcement (8 percent), Social Security (6 percent), and the military (2 percent). All major demographic categories—including senior citizens—support education funding over every other spending priority.

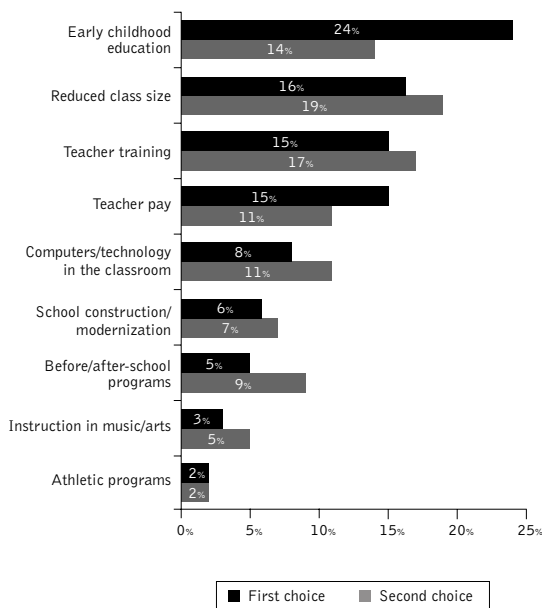
Americans, however, recognize that in the current economic climate there will be little or no new funding for education, especially at the state level. Nearly two-fifths (38 percent) of Americans would make early childhood education either their first or second choice to protect from budget cuts, followed by reduced class size (35 percent), teacher training (32 percent), and teacher pay (25 percent).

Accountability for All

Spending Priorities for State Budgets



Education Spending Priorities



EDUCATION REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY

Education ranks second only to the economy and jobs on the public's list of most serious concerns, even out-ranking terrorism, security, and the war in Afghanistan. Americans believe that quality education for all is a national priority. More than 4 out of 5 (85 percent) say achieving this goal is personally important to them, and more than 9 out of 10 (92 percent) Americans say that providing all children with a quality education is an attainable goal, not a pipe dream.

Americans care about school quality for practical reasons and out of concern for their community. They believe that quality public schools build stronger families (24 percent), improve the local economy (20 percent), and reduce crime rates (15 percent). Equally significant, school quality has a profound influence on where Americans live. Some 42 percent of Americans say their decisions about where to live were influenced by the quality of schools in the community.

We have made a national commitment to hold every student and every school accountable for measurable improvements in learning. Now voters say it is time to hold politicians to an equally high standard. Make no mistake: Politicians who fail to match education rhetoric with education results run the risk of earning an “F” in November.

—Wendy D. Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network

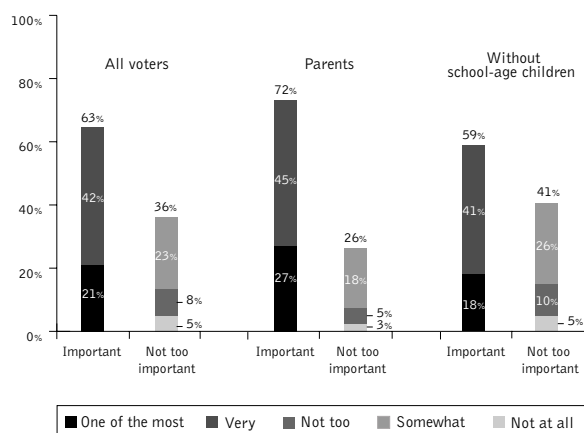
WHO IS A REAL EDUCATION CANDIDATE?

Today it seems all political candidates—whether vying for an office in city hall, a seat in the state legislature, or a chance to go to Washington—claim to be education candidates. But the public has very clear ideas on what education candidates should be doing and how elected officials will be held accountable.

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Americans say a candidate’s stance on education is either one of the most important factors or a very important factor influencing their vote. Even 59 percent of those without school-age children agree.

Americans feel much more favorably toward candidates who believe that education decisions are best made by parents, teachers, and principals (88 percent); who understand education issues (87 percent); who will protect education from budget cuts (86 percent); and who want education to focus on the basics (86 percent). In contrast, Americans are far less likely to favor candidates who suggest visionary programs without first explaining how they intend to fund and implement them (40 percent), who support vouchers (39 percent), or who favor giving mayors or city councils direct control over schools (38 percent).

Education: A High Priority in Voter Decisions



Voters are as suspicious of efforts to “dumb down” the curriculum as they are of politicians who dumb down democracy by talking a good education game but failing to deliver genuine education results.

—Virginia B. Edwards, editor and publisher of *Education Week*

Accountability for All

AMERICANS FOCUS ON TEACHER QUALITY

Americans have strikingly consistent views about how to improve public education nationwide. In each of the past two polls, nearly one-third of survey participants (29 percent) rated teacher quality as the most important factor in improving student learning, with equalized funding between rich and poor schools as the second most important factor (16 percent). In this year's poll, 15 percent of Americans also cite quality early childhood education for all children as an important factor in improving student learning, 12 percent say reduced class size, and another 12 percent want all children to be able to read by the fourth grade. However, a scant 5 percent believe that using taxpayer money for private school options will improve the quality of education.

One reason Americans support quality teaching is that many are teachers or know teachers. Three out of 10 Americans (29 percent) are teachers or have close family members who are current or former teachers. Survey results indicate this "teacher" group could be a powerful voting bloc; nearly three-quarters say that a politician's education platform plays a major role in their voting choices. In comparison, approximately two-thirds of all Americans say education plays a major role in their voting choices.

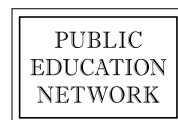
When it comes to assessing school performance, voters value information on teacher quality (76 percent) and student literacy (74 percent) the most, followed by information about books and other learning tools (74 percent), school budgets (67 percent), comparisons of local schools to other schools in the state (66 percent), and data on school safety (63 percent).

ABOUT THE POLL

Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates is based on a survey of 1,050 voting-age Americans. It includes analysis of a base of 800 voters and an oversample of 125 registered African-American voters and 125 registered Latino voters. It also includes information from three focus groups of whites, African Americans, and Latinos, with and without children. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. The poll is available online at www.PublicEducation.org and www.edweek.org.

Public Education Network is the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school reform organizations. Through its 70 local education fund (LEF) members in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the Network serves 6.5 million students in 8,600 schools in more than 300 school districts. PEN and its member LEFs are dedicated to the proposition that a quality public education is the right of every child, not the privilege of a few.

Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education. Produced by the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, this independent newspaper is now in its 21st publishing year. *Education Week* is well known for its annual *Quality Counts* report on the state of school reform in the 50 states, as well as for its award-winning coverage of news in the nation's public and private schools.



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